EXPERIENCE
AND
ITS MODES

by

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1933
Reprinted 1966, 1978
First paperback edition 1985
Reprinted 1990, 1991, 1994, 1995

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 34-16688

ISBN 0-521-31179-9 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2002

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I

INTRODUCTION

An interest in philosophy is often first aroused by an irrelevant impulse to see the world and ourselves better than we find them. We seek in philosophy what wiser men would look for in a gospel, some guidance as to *le prix des choses*, some convincing proof that there is nothing degrading in one's being alive, something to make the mystery of human existence less incomprehensible. Thinking is at first associated with an extraneous desire for action. And it is some time, perhaps, before we discern that philosophy is without any direct bearing upon the practical conduct of life, and that it has certainly never offered its true followers anything which could be mistaken for a gospel. Of course, some so-called philosophers afford pretext enough for this particular misunderstanding. Nearly always a philosopher hides a secret ambition, foreign to philosophy, and often it is that of the preacher. But we must learn not to follow the philosophers upon these holiday excursions.

Nor is this the only error to be avoided. The impulse of mere curiosity is no less foreign to philosophy. When we are consumed with a greed for information, philosophy appears as universal knowledge. Nothing, it seems, should be alien to the philosopher, who must hate ignorance more than he loves discrimination. But this indiscriminate pursuit of universal knowledge is scarcely better than a romantic obsession. And it is foreign to the character of philosophy, because when we are intent upon what is a whole and complete we must resign what is merely encyclopaedic. The *savant* as such is not a philosopher; there is little or nothing in common between the philosopher and the *philosophe*. It is only in the childhood of thought, when knowledge appears

undifferentiated and each fresh piece of information seems significant just because it is fresh, that universal knowledge can appear to satisfy the philosophic passion. At all events, in these days when we are more conscious of the futility of knowledge than its blessing, it is not to be expected that an encyclopaedia will attract him who is looking for a philosophy.

But when universal knowledge has been rejected in favour of valid knowledge as the end in philosophy, there are still more paths than one for us to choose from. And it is scarcely to be expected, in these days, that we should not be tempted to take up with the idea of philosophy as, in some sense, 'the fusion of the sciences', 'the synthesis of the sciences' or the *scientia scientiarum*. Yet, what are the sciences that they must be accepted as the datum, and as a datum not to be changed, of valid knowledge? And if we begin with the sciences, can our conclusion be other or more than merely scientific? These and other questions like them are what anyone must consider who, in search of a complete and satisfactory world of experience, is tempted by science. Nevertheless, whatever defect we may discover in, for example, the world of scientific experience, it is impossible to dismiss such a world of experience as merely invalid and look for a philosophy beyond it in some other, different world; that is too easy an escape. Even if truth is difficult to come at, nothing can be dismissed as mere error. Rather, what is required is a point of view from which the relative validity of any world of experience can be determined; what is required is a criterion. And in seeking this point of view, we seek a philosophy; and could we find it we should have found, if not a philosophy, at least a foundation upon which to build one.

Philosophical experience, then, I take to be experience without presupposition, reservation, arrest or modification. Philosophical knowledge is knowledge which carries with it the evidence of its own completeness. The philosopher is simply the victim of thought. And again, philosophy seems to be a mood; for we cannot always be engaged upon this

pursuit of what is finally satisfactory in experience. A man cannot be a philosopher and nothing else; to be so were either more or less than human. Such a life would, indeed, be at once febrile and insipid and not to be endured. But in philosophy (seldom desired and less often achieved), what is satisfactory is only what is positive and complete. And when philosophy is sought, it must be sought for its own sake. It depends for its existence upon maintaining its independence from all extraneous interests, and in particular from the practical interest. To popularize philosophy is at once to debase it: a general demand for philosophy is a general demand for its degradation. Few, perhaps, will be found willing to surrender the green for the grey, but only those few are on the way to a philosophy. And instead of a gospel, the most philosophy can offer us (in respect of practical life) is an escape, perhaps the only complete escape open to us.

The purpose of this book is to discover the main implications of this conception of philosophy. And in it I shall do no more than present a general point of view. It is an attempt, not to formulate a system, but to see clearly and to grasp firmly a single idea—the notion of philosophy as experience without reservation or arrest, experience which is critical throughout, unhindered and undistracted by what is subsidiary, partial or abstract. Such an idea is necessarily fleeting and elusive. And anyone moderately acquainted with the difficulties will not need to be told how often I have seen the day confuse what in the night had seemed clear. But, at the end, I am still not without hope that I have managed to convey the general point of view which lies at the back of my mind. It is a personal point of view in so far as it is mine and because philosophy consists, not in persuading others, but in making our own minds clear. But, in so far as I have been able to present the grounds upon which it rests, it is more than merely personal. Nor in saying that it is mine do I wish to claim any personal originality. Whatever element of truth it may contain has probably been advanced by

others before me, even if I am not myself aware of the occasion.

But philosophy, when it is taken to be experience without reservation or arrest, cannot disclaim the responsibility of accounting for the arrests which occur in experience, or at least the responsibility of determining their character. Indeed, this might be considered the main business of a philosophy conceived in this way. For ordinarily our experience is not clear and unclouded by abstract categories and postulates, but confused and distracted by a thousand extraneous purposes. And unless we are exceptionally fortunate, a clear and unclouded experience is to be realized only by a process of criticism and rejection. In philosophy, then, it is not less necessary to be unwearied in rejection than in invention, and it is certainly more difficult. But further, in philosophy nothing may be merely rejected. A form of experience is fallacious and to be rejected in so far as it fails to provide what is satisfactory in experience. But its refutation is not to be accomplished merely by ignoring or dismissing it. To refute is to exhibit the principle of the fallacy or error in virtue of which a form of experience falls short of complete coherence; it is to discover both the half-truth in the error, and the error in the half-truth.

Thus, what I have undertaken is, first, a study of the relationship which subsists between experience as a whole and for its own sake and the various arrests which experience suffers; and, secondly, a study of the relationship of these arrests to one another. It is, as I hope to show, an investigation of the relation of what is concrete to what is abstract, and of the relation of any one abstract world to any other. Of the first of these topics I will say no more now; it has frequently been considered and from many different standpoints. The second, however, has less frequently been discussed; and since it has about it an air of unreality, some apology may be required for considering it. To many, the question whether or not a certain way of thinking belongs (for example) to history, to science or to practice will appear

to introduce into the concrete whole of experience a principle of sterile purism; at best it will be considered merely 'academic', at worst an opportunity for pedantry. Indeed, those whose interest lies in the elucidation of one or other of these worlds of experience will naturally think it an insignificant question whether or not what they study is a science; and when we consider the way in which this question is usually formulated and discussed nothing, it would appear, could exceed its futility. To bother about a *confusion des genres* is the sign of decadent thought. But this is not the view of the matter I have come to take. For, as I considered the problem, it became increasingly clear that unless these forms of experience were separated and kept separate, our experience would be unprotected against the most insidious and crippling of all forms of error—irrelevance. And when we consider further the errors and confusion, the irrelevance and cross-purpose, which follow from a failure to determine the exact character and significance of (for example) scientific or historical experience, it becomes possible to suppose that those who offer us their opinions upon these topics may have something to say of which we should take notice. To dismiss the whole affair as a matter of mere words is the first impulse only of those who are ignorant of the chaos into which experience degenerates when this kind of question is answered perfunctorily or is left altogether without an answer. "Truth", says Bacon, "comes more easily out of error than of confusion": but the view which I have to recommend is that confusion, *ignoratio elenchi*, is itself the most fatal of all errors, and that it occurs whenever argument or inference passes from one world of experience to another, from what is abstracted upon one principle to what is abstracted upon another, from what is abstract to what is concrete, and from what is concrete to what is abstract. And if this be so, the importance of a criterion for determining this confusion is extreme. So far, then, as this part of my subject is concerned, it may be considered as an investigation of the character of irrelevance or *ignoratio elenchi*.

My purpose, then, is to defend a general view—to defend it by elucidating it. And consequently whatever detail I have admitted to my argument has been subordinated. I should, indeed, have preferred to have divested it even more thoroughly than I have been able of extraneous and obscuring detail. And that I have not been able to achieve this improvement is due, at least in part, to the present state of thought on the subjects I have been obliged to discuss. Where the field is encumbered with so many and elementary fallacies, a writer can scarcely avoid the task of weeding them out. Nevertheless, what I have to offer is not a complete account of my view, an account in which every alternative is considered, but an imperfect sketch, a mere outline. And further, I ought perhaps to say that it is a view which derives all that is valuable in it from its affinity to what is known by the somewhat ambiguous name of Idealism, and that the works from which I am conscious of having learnt most are Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* and Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*. I am aware that in these days many readers will require no other evidence than this confession to condemn my view out of hand. For the abuse which was formerly the lot of philosophy in general is now reserved for philosophical Idealism, which (it is the common opinion) is decadent, if not already dead. Its doctrines are held to comprise a mixture of fallacies and truisms, and the 'intellectualism' in philosophy of which it is the chief representative is counted a spent force needing no other evidence of its falsity than its own decay. So far as I can ascertain, however, these opinions are founded upon no firmer basis than one of confused reasoning and irrelevant anecdote. Idealism is in these days dismissed, it seems, because it has presumed to raise difficulties and question postulates which it were wiser to have left hidden and undisputed. There was, indeed, a time when a kind of Idealism was the orthodoxy of philosophy, but this fortunately is no longer the case. A received philosophy is one already dead. And if by calling it decadent, the opponents of Idealism mean nothing more than that it is out of fashion, its friends will ask nothing

better than the dispassionate criticism which a philosophy without a reputation to be feared may reasonably expect. In these circumstances, then, what seems to be required is not so much an apology for Idealism as a restatement of its first principles, and in so far as my view is Idealistic (and how far it is, I do not myself know), this is what I have attempted.

Anyone who has had a glimpse of the range and subtlety of the thought of Plato or of Hegel will long ago have despaired of becoming a philosopher. And most who have reflected upon the vigour and reach which enable these writers to afford place for what, to the lesser thinkers who preceded and followed them, is merely contradictory and irreconcilable, must have considered whether it were not better that they should give up the attempt. For there is less place for what is second-class in the field of philosophy than in any other field of intellectual interest. And moreover, the character of philosophy forbids us to console ourselves with the notion that, if we fail to achieve a coherent view of the whole field, we can at least do honest work in the cultivation of one of its corners. Philosophy has no such corners; whatever we say is said, if not explicitly, then ignorantly and implicitly, of the whole.

Thinking, however, is not a professional matter; if it were it would be something much less important than I take it to be. It is something we may engage in without putting ourselves in competition; it is something independent of the futile attempt to convince or persuade. Philosophy, the effort in thought to begin at the beginning and to press to the end, stands to lose more by professionalism and its impedimenta than any other study. And it is perhaps more important that we should keep ourselves unencumbered with merely parasitic opinion than that we should be aware of all, or even the best, that has been thought and said. For a philosophy, if it is to stand at all, must stand absolutely upon its own feet, and anything which tends to obscure this fact must be regarded with suspicion.

My debts, however, are many. And if I have often omitted to acknowledge the source of my arguments, it is for the double reason that in most cases I have forgotten it and that, since there are no 'authorities' in philosophy, references of this kind would but promote a groundless trust in books and a false attitude of mind. A philosopher is not, as such, a scholar; and philosophy, more often than not, has foundered in learning. There is no book which is indispensable for the study of philosophy. And to speak of a philosopher as ignorant is to commit an *ignoratio elenchi*; an historian or a scientist may be ignorant, philosophers merely stupid. But if, in an attempt to sail as free as possible from ballast, I have occasionally endangered my ship, I must plead that all I have desired is to achieve a general point of view, neither complete nor final, but systematic as far as it goes and presented as a reasoned whole.